



State of Rhode Island COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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TESTIMONY

BILL NO.: 2025 H 5841
BILL TITLE: An Act Relating to Education – Offenses Pertaining to Schools
PRIMARY SPONSOR: Representative Jennifer Stewart
COMMITTEE: House Committee on Education
DATE: 4/08/2025

The Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights (“Commission”) supports this bill.

The Commission is the state’s primary antidiscrimination law enforcement agency charged with investigating allegations of discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and delivery of services. Among the laws over which the Commission has jurisdiction is the Fair Employment Practices Act, Title 28, Chapter 5 of the General Laws of Rhode Island (hereafter referred to as the “FEPA”).

This bill seeks to amend the FEPA, the Rhode Island Civil Rights Act of 1990 and R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-38-1 to define “Race” as including traits historically associated with race, including, but not limited to, hair texture and protective hairstyles such as braids, locs, cornrows and twists. Rhode Island is now a part of the minority of states without explicit prohibitions against discrimination based on hairstyles and other traits associated with race, as twenty-five other states have passed similar legislation into law, and executive orders inspired by this legislation have issued in two additional states.¹ States with similar laws on the books include New York, California, Texas and **every New England state other than Rhode Island.**

A 2019 study by the Dove company found that Black women were disproportionately burdened by workplace policies and practices that single them out for natural hair styles—referring to the texture of hair that is not permed, dyed, relaxed or chemically altered. The study found that Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair, 30% more likely to be made aware of a formal workplace appearance policy and 3.4 times more likely to have their hair viewed as unprofessional. The study also found that Black women are 80% more likely to feel they have to change their hair from its natural state to “fit in” at the office and

¹ <https://www.thecrownact.com/about>

83% more likely to report being judged more harshly on their looks than other women.² A follow-up study in 2023 produced similar findings. Among them, 66% of Black women change their hair for a job interview, and over 20% of Black women aged 25-34 have been sent home from work because of their hair.³

Black students have faced similar discrimination in schools.⁴ Another study by the Dove company found that 66% of Black girls in majority-white schools reported experiencing race-based hair discrimination.⁵ This bill seeks to address the disparities highlighted by these studies.

The Commission believes this bill would create more equitable workplaces and schools in Rhode Island by explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on hairstyles and other traits historically linked to a particular race. Therefore, the Commission urges this Committee to pass this bill.

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² Dove, The CROWN Research Study, 2019.

³ Dove, CROWN 2023 Workplace Research Study.

⁴ For a few examples of students affected by this type of discrimination, see the following articles:

<https://www.npr.org/2023/09/22/1200374764/crown-act-texas-hairstyles-law-nationwide>

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/08/us/black-hair-discrimination-schools-trnd/index.html?form=MY01SV&OCID=MY01SV>;

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/10/14/black-hair-laws-passed-stop-natural-hair-discrimination-across-us/3850402002/#>;

⁵ Dove, Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls, 2021.